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COIN HOARDS

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IRAQ - A Hoard of Seventh-century Byzantine Solidi found in Arbela (Iraqi Kurdistan)

3. Arbela, Iraqi Kurdistan 2018 (?)

by

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A Hoard of Seventh-century Byzantine Solidi found in Arbela (Iraqi Kurdistan)

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[**PLATES 50–52**]

Dep. *c*.660 AD 64 *AV*

Disp. Dispersed

Introduction

Recently a Kurdish source informed us of a hoard of 64 Byzantine solidi, dated to the reigns of Phocas, Heraclius and Constans II. Unfortunately the coins have been sold and their whereabouts cannot now be traced. The coins, said to comprise the entire hoard, were photographed but unfortunately we have only the obverses for those numbered 41 to 60. The circumstances of discovery are unknown, but the hoard was found in, or near, the modern city of Erbil, ancient Arbela, in Iraqi Kurdistan, Northern Iraq. It is therefore the only important hoard of seventh-century Byzantine solidi found in Northern Iraq.

Description of the hoard: types and officinae

The majority of the coins of the hoard, 45 solidi, were issues of Heraclius (610–41) there were 15 of Phocas (602–10) and four of Constans II (641–68). The closing date of the hoard is around 660 suggesting it was deposited roughly at the time of the last resistance of the Byzantines to the conquest of Northern Mesopotamia by the Muslim armies. Mintmark, fabric and style of the solidi indicate the coins were all issued by the imperial mint at Constantinople.

The preponderance of coins of Heraclius is characteristic of seventh-century gold hoards found in Syria. Coins of Heraclius class IIB, dated 616–25, represent the largest group (20 specimens, nos 16–35). The next largest is the group depicting three standing figures, class IV (20 solidi, nos 41–60), especially from the period when Heraclonas appears crowned (636–41). No new sub-types of Heraclius have been noticed in the hoard. The latest of the four coins of Constans II (nos 61–64) points to a closing date for the hoard of around 659/60.

[1] Respectively, Universidad Complutense de Madrid / Wolfson College (Oxford) and Universitat de València.

Type and chronology	*Quantity*	*Catalogue number*
Phocas, Class III (603–7)	4	*DOC* 5
Phocas, Class IV (607–10)	11	*DOC* 10
Heraclius, Class IIB (616–25)	20	*DOC* 13
Heraclius, Class III (629–31)	5	*DOC* 26
Heraclius, Class IVA (632–36/7)	4	*DOC* 33–7
Heraclius, Class IVB (636/7–641)	16	*DOC* 38–50
Constans sole emperor (641–54)	3	*DOC* 1j, *DOC* 5c Morrisson 1972, nos 389–90
Constans II and Constantine IV (654–9)	1	*DOC* 25b

The hoard does not include any light-weight solidi, and none of the coins are clipped or have graffiti or marks on their surfaces. Most show signs of wear with the exception of the four solidi of Constans II, which are in almost mint condition. The distribution of the solidi with visible officinae marks in the reverses is as follows:

	A	B	Γ	Δ	E	S	Z	H	Θ	I
Phocas	1		1		3	2	3			5
Heraclius	6	1			7		2	2	3	4
Constans		1				1			1	1
Totals	*7*	*2*	*1*	*0*	*10*	*3*	*5*	*2*	*4*	*10*

This table confirms the accepted view that E and I are the most frequent officinae found on sixth- and seventh-century solidi in the East.[2] With the exception of A, which is unusually common for Heraclius in the present hoard, the letters E and I are at least twice as common as each of other officinae as the table shows. This supremacy of both letters usually characterises the reigns of Phocas and Heraclius. From Constans II onwards however, this pattern breaks down.

The significance of these officina letters is still uncertain but it probably had to do with the administrative organisation of the mint. Philip Grierson believed the letters did not imply different ateliers of production, or regional distribution of different series, but government departments which were responsible for their circulation or even different functionaries or *officinator*.[3] In this regard, Cécile Morrisson has even suggested that solidi dies were occasionally collected and redistributed later in other areas, with new officinae.[4]

Metrology and comparative Syrian material

The total weight of the coins in the Arbela hoard is 280 grams, individual solidi ranging from 4.19 to 4.43 grams with an average weight of 4.38 grams, that is 23 to 23½ carats The same average is predominant in other Syrian hoards and the Arbela hoard seems to confirm the thesis about 'weight rationality' put forward by Morrisson, that older solidi (Heraclian in particular) found in post Muslim conquest hoards from

[2] Morrisson 1972, p. 46 and note 31; Callegher 2018, p. 343; see also *DOC* 2/1, p. 35 and Grierson 1961, p. 7.

[3] *DOC* 2/1, p. 35 and p. 114; Grierson 1961, p. 7.

[4] Morrisson 1972, pp. 42–3.

Syria, Jordan and Palestine are generally lighter than the standard Byzantine solidus of 24 carats (4.55 g).[5]

Morrisson suggests the reasons for this geographical difference can be explained by monetary circulation in this area. After 636 Syria and Palestine were politically and militarily separated from the Byzantine empire, resulting in a decrease in the influx of Byzantine gold. This would have resulted in prolonged use of the older solidi already circulating in the region. These solidi would loose weight, circulating as light solidi of 23 or 23½ carats, a weight which was also common in Syria in the seventh century.[6] According to Morrisson, 4.37 grams was precisely the weight of the pre-Islamic *mithqal*. Thus, both the light-weight solidi and the worn Byzantine solidi would have fitted the local standard for solidi in Syria.[7] Such coins had been especially sought after by the Syrians under Arab rule since 636.[8]

The Heraclian solidi in the Arbela hoard resemble those of other gold assemblages from Greater Syria where coins of Constans II and of Constantine IV are the latest.[9] The assumption that Byzantine solidi in circulation in Greater Syria and Northern Mesopotamia after 636 were consciously selected in Arab controlled Syria, albeit in decreasing numbers, and until ʿAbd al-Malik's reform in 696/7, can be doubted in the light of the Arbela hoard.[10]

Hoards buried in c.660 such as Daphne 1980 and Arbela 2018: are they related to the Arab reform of 697 or to purely Byzantine events?

Hoarding in the early Byzantine period is still poorly understood, but it has been argued that Syrian hoards can be classified into two groups according to their relationship with the Arab conquest. The first were deposited during and after the Muslim conquest (*c.*636) and the second in the years before the reforms (696/7) of ʿAbd al-Malik, motivated by fear of confiscation of good Byzantine money by the Arab authorities.[11] The Arbela hoard, with a closing date of around 660, is far too early to be associated with the second of these. Hans-Christoph Noeske, contrary to Morrisson and Grierson, suggests that the Byzantine gold in Syria after *c.*636 could have arrived in the region for the use of Byzantine consumers, still numerous in the region after 636 and for several decades to come.[12]

The Daphne 1980 hoard (found near Antioch) is probably the closest in its composition to that of Arbela. It consisted of 66 gold coins, the majority being those of Heraclius with only ten later pieces: seven coins of Constans II (including one semissis) and two of Constantine IV (668–85). In his account of the hoard William Metcalf emphasised the low number of recent coins in a 'hoard that could have been

[5] Morrisson 1972, pp. 39 and 61.
[6] Morrisson 1972, p. 58.
[7] Smedley1988, p. 125.
[8] Grierson 1960, p. 256; Morrisson 1972, p. 61.
[9] Bijovsky 2002, figure 11, p. 183; Bijovsky 2012, p. 149 and note 4; Callegher 2018, p. 350.
[10] Bijovsky 2002, supplemented by Bijovsky 2012 (includes the important Rehov hoard which contains a coin of Justinian II).
[11] Grierson 1960, pp. 247 and 256; Morrisson 1972, p. 61.
[12] Noeske 2002, I, pp. 79–89.

deposited before 674 at the earliest'. In fact, if one removes the last nine coins, what remains is an assemblage which would be perfectly reasonable for the last years of Heraclius.[13]

The Arbela and the Daphne hoards are not only the closest among all Syrian hoards due to their sizes (66 and 64 gold coins respectively) and their Northern Syrian locations. The last few coins added to both assemblages indicate that these deposits were made up of two separate parcels. There is clearly a first parcel dating up to 641, constituting 90% and 96% respectively of the whole hoards, plus a second much smaller parcel of later material.

The Arbela and Daphne hoards do not appear to differ from other southern assemblages typical of Jordan, Israel or Southern and Central Syria. In the first decades after the Islamic conquest until the onset of Umayyad rule, the region of Syria and Northern Mesopotamia mainly remained a dependent Byzantine province in regard to its monetary organisation. Therefore, the simplest explanation for the deposition of the Arbela or the Daphne hoards, as for the majority of the Syrian hoards deposited around 670–97, would be in accordance with Gresham's law: the introduction of lighter Islamic dinars might have encouraged the accumulation and hoarding of the older and heavier Byzantine solidi.[14] However, the Arbela hoard differs from the majority of the Syrian hoards in that it seems to have been buried at a slightly earlier date (660) with only four out of 64 coins dated to the reign of Constans II. As in the case of the Daphne hoard it is possible to think of the Arbela hoard as an exception to Morrisson rule. That is, it was not hoarded by Arab users in the late seventh century. It also differs in that it is a combination of two separate lots of material.[15]

Military instability and Byzantine activity in Northern Mesopotamia c.660, a possible reason for the concealment of the Arbela hoard

One reason for the anomalous composition of the Arbela hoard could be that the region of Nineveh (Mosul) and Arbela (Erbil) was the centre of gravity of Heraclius's strategy in 627/8 during the last phase of his war against the Persians and remained so for many years. He even sent considerable numbers of Byzantine troops and commanders to the extreme Northwest territories still nominally under the jurisdiction of the Sasanian empire. Soldiers (Byzantine, Armenians or Arabs) who served in Mesopotamia must have received payments for many years after this date. No budgetary records or muster lists survive,[16] but Persia did not succeed in recovering its military power after 627.[17] There is evidence in succeeding years of several Byzantine generals taking responsibility in restoring firm Byzantine authority, not only in trans-Jordania, but also in upper Mesopotamia and northern Syria.[18]

[13] Metcalf 1980, p. 97.

[14] Heidemann 1998, p. 97; Treadwell 2009.

[15] Metcalf 1980, p. 97.

[16] Kaegi 2003, p. 222.

[17] Sebeos 137, Thomson *et al*., 1999, vol. I, p. 98, states for the years 636–40 that 'The Persian kingdom was eclipsed at that time, and their army was divided into three parts'.

[18] Kaegi 2003, pp. 226–7; Sebeos 136, Thomson *et al*. 1999, vol. I, p. 98, states that the Ishmaelite forces were divided at the time into three parts, one being 'in the north, opposing the Greek empire'.

The rout of the Roman army in Palestine and Syria in 635–6 did not affect the Roman positions in Northern Mesopotamia and Armenia and the Chronicle of Sebeos refers to Mzhêh Gnuni taking command of all regular Roman forces stationed in Armenia *c.*630/1.[19] At this time the Persians were unable to oppose any Armenian-Byzantine movements in Northern Mesopotamia.[20] Roman and Armenian troops at the service of the Byzantine emperor continued to be stationed in the region after this date as is demonstrated by the activities of the 'Greek general', Theodore, in Armenia and Northern Mesopotamia after 644/5.[21] He was successor to the previous *Magister Militum per Orientem*, Valentinus, and a precursor to Procopius, Constans' representative in the East after 650/1.[22] Afterwards, and contemporaneously to the intervention of the Emperor Constans II in Armenia and Northern Mesopotamia in 653/4, the general Morianos / Mawrianos is mentioned in the Chronicle of Sebeos, something which demonstrates the continuity of the presence of a powerful Greek army in the region, not just composed of Armenian princes and their troops.[23] That these forces, Armenian and Byzantine alike, were provided with gold Byzantine coins is suggested by Sebeos when he states that the Armenian general Theodore Rshtuni received a stipend (*rochik* or *rhoga*) from the treasury of the Emperor Constans II.[24]

This Byzantine presence in Northern Mesopotamia (since the battle of Nineveh in 627) may explain why, at the time of the Muslim conquest of Iraq and even later, some Byzantine commanders and forces are mentioned as being stationed in an area from Hit on the middle Euphrates to Takrit on the Tigris.[25] After the defeat of a Muslim army near Constantinople and of an Arab field army in Cappadocia, Roman forces in Northern Mesopotamia and the Caucasus exuded confidence by the spring of 655. Possibly in connection with this, a bitter Arab civil war erupted in 656 (the first Arab *fitna*), which, in its turn, greatly encouraged Constans II to launch a second military expedition to Transcaucasia in his nineteenth regnal year (659/60). This followed a campaign in his twelfth regnal year (652/3). Imperial fortunes in 659 were easier than in 653, and Constans II reached Media in the autumn of 659, before withdrawing to Armenia where he was in the following spring.[26]

In all these cases, the Adiabene region, where the cities of Arbela and Nineveh lie, must have been a real centre of gravity for the Roman army, as it gave the possessor the initiative and key to the heart of Mesopotamia. This was so in 627 for Heraclius and again in 750 on the occasion of the battle of the Zab, which sealed the fate of the Umayyads. During the years 654 to 660 the large Roman expeditionary armies of Constans II and Mawrianos were nearby. These, according to the Armenian Chronicle attributed to Sebeos, were both the main source of and the witness to the unrest of

[19] Sebeos 131–3, Thomson *et al*. 1999, vol. I, pp. 90–4; vol. II, p. 228.

[20] Sebeos 133, Thomson *et al*. 1999, pp. 93–4; vol. II, p. 230.

[21] Sebeos 139, 144, Thomson *et al*. 1999, vol. I, p. 101; vol. II, pp. 254–5.

[22] Thomson *et al*. 1999, vol. II, p. 269.

[23] Sebeos 168, 174, Thomson *et al*. 1999, vol. I, pp. 142, 150; vol. II, p. 279.

[24] Sebeos 143, Thomson *et al*. 1999, vol. I, p. 108 but there is of course no indication what form this payment took; cf. Hendy 1985, pp. 190–1 for the *rhogai* of the seventh century and their distribution from Constantinople.

[25] Fredegarius, *Chronicle* 64 and Kaegi 2003, p. 219 and note 107.

[26] Thomson *et al*. 1999, vol. II, pp. 274–88.

the whole region during these years.[27] The Arab civil war ended in 661 and the Arab leader Mu'awiya was able to resume the Arab offensive against the Greeks, which effectively ended Byzantine operations in Armenia and nearby regions.

It cannot be said with certainty why the Arbela hoard was concealed nor can we say whether some of the coins had circulated in the region since the battle of Nineveh in 627 or if they had been brought to the region during the years 653/4–660. What can be said, though, is that the closing date of the Arbela hoard *c*.660 seems to point to an assemblage deposited in relation to the effective ending of a Byzantine military presence in Northern Mesopotamia, Armenia and Media.

CATALOGUE

All coins are from the mint of Constantinople

Cat. no.	*Wt (g)*	*Diam. (mm)*	*Die axis (h)*	*Officina*	*Reference DOC*
			Focas (602–10) (15 coins)		
Class III. *c*.603–7, *Obv*. Normal bust, without pendilia; *rev*. Angel standing (4 coins)					
1.	4.42	22	7	A	*DOC* 5a
2.	4.40	22	6	Γ	*DOC* 5c
3.	4.35	21	7	Z	*DOC* 5g
4.	4.43	22	7	I	*DOC* 5j
Class IV. *c*.607–10 (11 coins)					
5.	4.35	22	7	Є	*DOC* 10e 1–5
6.	4.41	21	7	Є	*DOC* 10e 6–7
7.	4.40	21	7	Є	”
8.	4.39	22	7	S	*DOC* 10f
9.	4.38	22	7	S	”
10.	4.39	22	7	Z	*DOC* 10g
11.	4.38	22	7	Z[28]	”
12.	4.35	21	7	I	*DOC* 10j
13.	4.34	21	7	I	”
14.	4.34	21	7	I	”
15.	4.33	21	7	I / И in right field	*DOC* 10c2
			Heraclius (610–41) (45 coins)		
			Heraclius and Heraclius Constantine (616–31) (25 coins)		
Class IIB. No symbol in field, *c*.616–25 (17 coins)					
16.	4.19	20	7	A	*DOC* 13a
17.	4.19	20	7	A	”
18.	4.19	20	7	A	”
19.	4.20	20	7	A	”
20.	4.19	20	7	A	”

[27] Sebeos 165–76, Thomson *et al*. 1999, vol. I, pp. 136–54.

[28] Overstrike on a Class III specimen.

21.	4.41	21	7	Ƀ	*DOC* 13b
22.	4.42	21	7	Є	*DOC* 13d
23.	4.41	21	7	Є	”
24.	4.43	21	7	Є	”
25.	4.40	21	7	Є	”
26.	4.42	21	7	Є	”
27.	4.41	21	7	И	*DOC* 13f
28.	4.40	21	7	Н	*DOC* 13g
29.	4.39	21	7	Н	”
30.	4.38	20	7	Ɵ	*DOC* 13h
31.	4.37	20	7	Ɵ	”
32.	4.42	20	7	I	*DOC* 13i

Class IIB. Symbol in right field. *c*.616–25 (3 coins)

33.	4.37	21	6	Є	*DOC* 14d
34.	4.36	22	7	Є (И in right field)[29]	*DOC* -
35.	4.39	20	6	Ƶ (Ɵ in right field)	*DOC* 16b

Class III. Heraclius with long beard. 629–31 (5 coins)
IIIa. No symbol in reverse field (5 coins)

36.	4.36	20	6	A	*DOC* 26a
37.	4.39	21	6	Ɵ	*DOC* 26i
38.	4.41	21	6	I	*DOC* 26j
39.	4.38	21	6	I	”
40.	4.37	21	6	I	”

Heraclius, Heraclius Constantine and Heraclonas (632–41) (20 coins)

Class IV. Three standing figures (632–41) (20 coins)
Class IV A. (a) – (e). Heraclonas uncrowned (632–636/7) (4 coins)

41.	4.41	21	6	?	*DOC* 33–7
42.	4.41	20	6	?	”
43.	4.40	20	6	?	”
44.	4.39	20	6	?	”

Class IV B. (f) – (s). Heraclonas crowned (636/7–641) (16 coins)

45.	4.36	23	6	?	*DOC* 38–50
46.	4.41	21	6	?	”
47.	4.41	21	6	?	”
48.	4.41	20	6	?	”
49.	4.40	21	6	?	”
50.	4.40	20	7	?	”
51.	4.40	20	7	?	”
52.	4.39	19	6	?	”
53.	4.39	19	6	?	”
54.	4.39	19	6	?	”
55.	4.38	19	6	?	”
56.	4.38	20	6	?	”

[29] Double strike.

57.	4.38	19	7	?	”
58.	4.37	20	6	?	”
59.	4.37	19	6	?	”
60.	4.36	19	6	?	”

Constans II (641–68) (4 coins)
Constans sole emperor (641–54) (3 coins)

Class I (a) 641–6 (1 coin)

61.	4.43	21	7	I	*DOC* 1j

Class I (e) 647 (1 coin)

62.	4.41	21	7	S	*DOC* 5c

Class II (f) 650/1 (1 coin)

63.	4.35	21	7	Θ	Morrisson 1972, p. 83, nos 389–90

Constans II with Constantine IV (654–9) (1 coin)

Class IV (a) (1 coin)

64.	4.41	21	6	B	*DOC* 25b

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PLATE 50

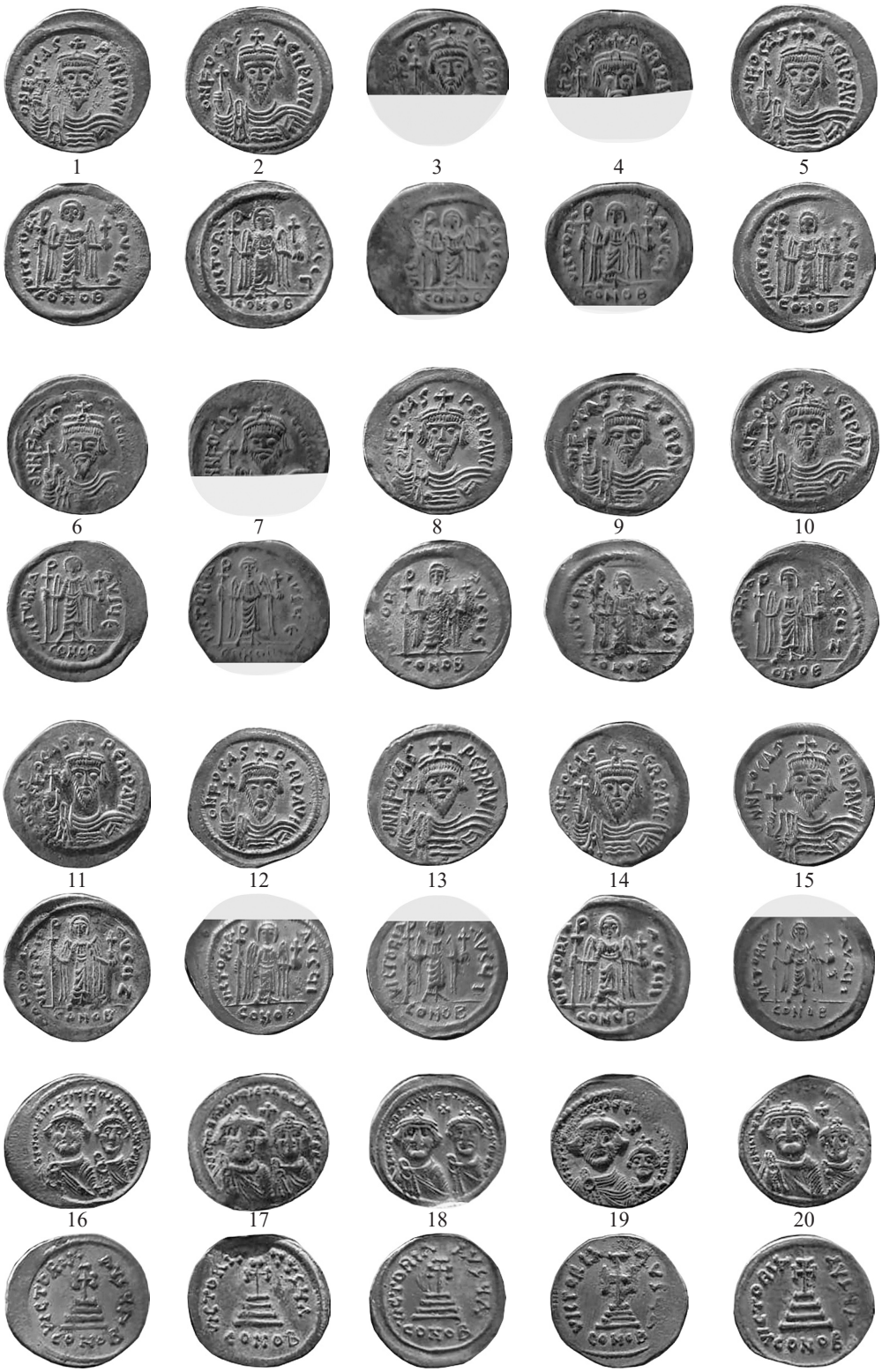


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PLATE 52


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